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Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People

Summary record of the 308th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Wednesday, 23 April 2008, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. Badji ..... (Senegal)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

Adoption of the agenda

1. *The agenda was adopted.*

Update on developments since the previous meeting of the Committee

2. **The Chairman** said that on 19 and 20 February 2008, the Committee had held the United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People in Amman and on 21 February 2008, the Committee's delegation had visited two Palestine refugee camps outside Amman.

3. On 29 February 2008, the Bureau had issued a statement on the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (GA/PAL/1080), in which it expressed serious concern over the escalation of violence in the Territory, especially in the Gaza Strip; reiterated its position that the Israeli occupation of the Territory was the main cause of the conflict; and called on the parties to urgently take steps aimed at appreciably improving the daily lives of the Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, in accordance with the understandings reached in Annapolis and Paris.

4. On 4 March, the Secretary-General had appointed Mr. Maxwell Gaylard as Deputy Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, at the level of Assistant Secretary-General. Mr. Gaylard, an Australian national, would also serve as United Nations coordinator for humanitarian and development activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

5. Since the Committee's previous meeting, Palestinian Authority President Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Olmert and their negotiating teams had met five times to discuss permanent status issues. At their most recent meeting, the two leaders had reiterated their commitment to the Annapolis process and to reaching an agreement by the end of the year. President Abbas was currently meeting with United States President Bush in Washington, D.C.

6. On 17 April 2008, the Quartet had met at the Envoy level in Amman to discuss, inter alia, the holding of a meeting in Moscow as a follow-up to the Annapolis Conference. Earlier that month, the Executive Director of the Office of the United Nations Register of Damage Caused by the Construction of the Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory had visited that Territory and Israel in order to establish direct contacts with the relevant parties.

The situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem

7. **Ms. Rasheed** (Observer for Palestine) said that over the past month, the Israeli occupying forces had continued their illegal policies and practices against the Palestinian people in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, particularly in the Gaza Strip, and the situation on the ground had continued to deteriorate at all levels. In one day alone, at least 20 Palestinians, most of them civilians and at least five of them children, had been killed in Israeli military assaults in Gaza; a total of over 70 Palestinians, several of them children, had been killed by Israeli forces in the previous month. Just as the number of dead continued to rise, so did the number of wounded. Furthermore, hospital operations continued to be seriously hampered by the shortage of medicines and medical supplies, the poor maintenance of equipment, fuel shortages and power cuts. The occupying forces continued to perpetrate killings and destruction and carry out arrests throughout the West Bank, too.

8. Just the previous week, the Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine had sent letters to the Secretary-General and the Presidents of the Security Council and the General Assembly to alert them and Member States about the continued deterioration of the situation at all levels and, in particular, about Israel's most recent rampage against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip. As a result of Israel's unlawful measures of collective punishment and of the ongoing siege, the civilian population continued to face a dire humanitarian crisis, enduring food, medical and fuel shortages. Now in its tenth month, the siege had obstructed humanitarian aid, supplies and access, and destroyed any sense of normality in the Gaza Strip. The increasing fuel shortages, which already affected all aspects of life, had become even more acute after Israeli forces had cut fuel supplies the previous week in response to the recent attack on the Nahal Oz depot.

9. According to United Nations agencies operating in the Gaza Strip, Israel's deliberate reduction of fuel had seriously affected the delivery of humanitarian assistance. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) had reported that it had not received any

fuel supplies since 9 April 2008, that it was using fuel reserves left over from earlier reduced shipments and that, unless fuel stocks were replenished, their vehicles would grind to a halt in a few days' time. The cuts were jeopardizing the Agency's operations and forcing most of its staff to walk to work. The continued suspension of fuel supplies to the Gaza Strip was likely to cause a serious humanitarian disaster.

10. On 15 April 2008, eight United Nations organizations had issued a joint statement expressing their concern at the severe impact of limited fuel supplies on the civilian population and United Nations operations, and emphasizing that the current situation was a threat to the health and well-being of the population. If the situation deteriorated further, the main threats to health would include an increased risk of maternal, infant and under-five deaths; waterborne disease; trauma and depression; poor and deteriorating social and economic coping mechanisms with lack of access to health care; and disrupted distribution or shortages of drugs, medical kits and blood supplies.

11. The already tense situation in the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory also continued to deteriorate. Israel's illegal settlements and illegal construction of the wall, particularly in and around East Jerusalem, were among the most serious obstacles to peace and a two-State solution. In addition, its more than 550 checkpoints and roadblocks throughout the West Bank restricted freedom of movement, disrupted socio-economic life and made the humiliation of the civilian population an everyday occurrence. Israel's continuing settlement construction campaign undermined the contiguity, integrity and unity of the Territory and threatened the two-State solution. It was regrettable, therefore, that Israel had recently announced tenders for another 100 new units to be built in various settlements throughout the West Bank, in addition to the over 1,000 new units announced for construction since the Annapolis Conference. Such activities constituted a violation of Israel's previous commitments, a grave breach of international humanitarian law and a violation of various General Assembly and Security Council resolutions, and poisoned the atmosphere between the two sides.

12. Even though the Palestinian and Israeli sides had met frequently since the Annapolis Conference, including at the senior level, Israel's illegal actions on the ground had prevented any significant progress from being made on the peace process. Even so, efforts to advance the process and conduct substantive negotiations on final status issues continued. Moreover, the Palestinian leadership remained committed to the peace process and continued to make every effort to seek the support of all concerned parties with a view to achieving a just, lasting and peaceful settlement.

13. President Abbas had just returned from Moscow where, in talks with Russian Federation President Putin and other high-ranking Russian officials on the current status of negotiations, he had stressed the importance of convening an international conference in Moscow as soon as possible as a follow-up to the Annapolis and Paris meetings. President Abbas had stressed that the numerous obstacles still hampering the peace process had not made it possible to achieve the progress necessary for the two sides to reach the agreed objectives before 2009. He had also expressed his hope that all the parties that had attended the Annapolis and Paris meetings would participate in the Moscow meeting, so as to accelerate the peace process and put further pressure on Israel to comply with its obligations under the Road Map. The release of the more than 11,000 Palestinians currently being held in Israeli jails and detention centres in contravention of the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (Fourth Geneva Convention) was a crucial step that would help create an environment conducive to achieving a peace agreement.

14. President Abbas, President Bush and other United States officials would be discussing those and other topics during President Abbas' visit to Washington D.C. that week. In addition, President Abbas would consult President Bush on ways to reach an agreement with Israel by the end of the year and stress the need for a framework for resolving sensitive final status issues. He would also meet twice with United States Secretary of State Rice, to review the progress achieved in preparation for the Sharm el-Sheikh meeting of 17 May 2008, which would be hosted by Egyptian President Mubarak and which both President Abbas and President Bush would attend.

15. A number of events were being planned to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the Nakba in 1948, the catastrophe that dispossessed the Palestinian people and rendered them Stateless. They included the conference to be held at the headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Paris, on 29 and 30 April

2008; the photograph exhibit on Palestine refugees that UNRWA, in cooperation with the Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine, would be launching at United Nations Headquarters on 5 May 2008; and the special meeting on the Palestine refugee question that the Committee was planning for June. She encouraged Member States to participate in those events and to use the occasion to reaffirm their solidarity with the Palestinian people and redouble their collective efforts towards a just and peaceful resolution of the question of Palestine in all its aspects.

16. **Mr. Whitley** (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)) said that 10 months of crushing sanctions on Gaza were stripping the civilian population of all dignity and reducing them to despair. Instead of the policy of collective punishment, which had failed, the crossings into Israel and Egypt should be opened and the normal movement of people and goods restored immediately. The reopening of the crossings was particularly urgent if the recently relaunched peace process was to bear fruit. Inadequate supplies of food and other vital household items were causing the prices of the few goods still available to spiral out of reach of the vast majority of the population. Moreover, the escalation of violence in and around Gaza was having dire consequences on non-combatants. Since January alone, 53 Palestinian children had been killed — eight on one day alone — and 177 injured. Health-care, water and sanitation services were on the brink of collapse and, because fuel supplies were drying up, UNRWA was no longer able to provide local municipalities with fuel for pumping water and sewage.

17. The lack of fuel, particularly diesel and petrol for vehicles, was the most immediate crisis. For days now, many UNRWA staff had been forced to walk to work because Agency stocks were so low. The following day they would run out completely and vital humanitarian and public services, such as food delivery and rubbish collection, would come to a halt. The 1 million litres of fuel with which Israel had just agreed to resupply Gaza's electrical power station would last three days. Thereafter, the situation would return to crisis level. Even now, 20 per cent of Ministry of Health ambulances had no fuel and over 60 per cent had less than a week's supply; hospital fuel reserves were below the critical 25-per-cent level; rubbish was piling up in the streets; and 15 diesel-powered water wells had been shut down, cutting off water supplies to 70,000 people. Gaza was indeed on the brink of a crisis. Israel, which was enforcing the overall, unacceptable curbs on fuel, clearly bore primary responsibility; however, various Palestinian bodies whose actions lately had not been helpful also played a contributing role. They included local militant groups, which had been firing on crossing points and fuel depots, and the local association of fuel distribution companies, which had not been very cooperative.

18. The recent removal of some of the barriers controlling the movement of people and goods in the West Bank had made no significant impact on the humanitarian situation and, from the perspective of UNRWA, no material difference to the situation on the ground.

19. Lastly, owing to rising food prices worldwide and to the fact that its emergency appeal had been funded at only half the desired level, the Agency's food distribution programme in Gaza had been reduced from 850,000 to 650,000 people. To ensure that children and other vulnerable groups were not affected and to stem the tide of malnutrition, UNRWA had started a school feeding programme in its schools, which currently benefited 110,000 children. The Agency hoped to obtain additional funding later in the year, as only then would it be able to fully meet real needs.

20. In conclusion, the humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory was grave and unsustainable and the gap between the reality on the ground and the expectations arising from the peace process was growing. That gap must be closed if the current negotiations were to have any chance of success.

21. **Mr. Al-Allaf** (Jordan) said that his Government had been following with deep concern the tragic developments in Gaza and the constant Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people. It was hard to imagine that just a few months earlier so much hope had been placed on a possible breakthrough and a resumption of negotiations. The letter of the Ambassador of Palestine currently being circulated drew the Committee's attention once again to the continued difficulties, the 10-month siege of the Gaza Strip, the cutting of fuel supplies, the obstruction of humanitarian aid, the escalation of violence and the rising toll of dead and injured.

22. The deteriorating humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory was unacceptable; the escalation of violence and violations must stop. Just the day before, the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process had stated that the international agencies operating in the Gaza Strip would hold an emergency meeting to review the increasingly dire humanitarian situation and had pointed out that, if fuel was not allowed in by the following day, the Gaza power plant would be forced to halt operations, resulting in power cuts of up to eight hours a day. As the Committee had just heard, UNRWA fuel supplies would also run out later that week.

23. Jordan condemned Israel's excessive and disproportionate use of force, collective punishment and targeted extrajudicial killings, its confiscation of Palestinian land, its continued expansion of settlements and its construction of the separation wall.

24. Jordan had hoped that the recent United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People, which it was proud to have hosted, would have built on the momentum created in Annapolis and Paris. The Seminar, a serious undertaking designed to explore the establishment of a viable Palestinian economy, including through rehabilitation and reform, had reflected the Committee's efforts to support the Palestinian people. His Government hoped that further efforts would be made to implement the Seminar's objectives.

25. Despite the current difficulties, Jordan would continue to support the Palestinian authorities' efforts to move the peace process forward and achieve a final solution in line with the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative and international resolutions, leading to the creation of an independent Palestinian State on Palestinian land.

26. **Mr. Abdelaziz** (Egypt) said that the Committee must take a stand on the current situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, particularly since Israel was likely to follow its usual course of action and respond to the letters sent by the Ambassador of Palestine to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council by addressing other issues, as if nothing was happening. He proposed, therefore, that the Committee should write to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council highlighting the severe humanitarian situation facing the Palestinian people and UNRWA and requesting them to intensify their contacts with Israel so as to prevent a further escalation of violence and alleviate the Palestinian people's suffering. The Committee might also wish to include a call for some form of action to help UNRWA conduct its operations on the ground; perhaps the Chairman could consult the UNRWA representative and the Palestinian delegation regarding the type of support most needed. A unanimous message from the Committee to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council would signal that the concerns raised were not only those of the Ambassador of Palestine, but of the Committee as a whole.

27. **The Chairman** said that he had taken note of the proposal.

Report by the Chairman on the United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People, Amman, 19 and 20 February 2008

28. **The Chairman**, reporting on the United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People held in Amman on 19 and 20 February 2008, said that opening statements had been made by Mr. Judeh, the Jordanian Minister of State for Media Affairs and Communications and Acting Foreign Minister; Mr. Serry, the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and the Secretary-General's Personal Representative to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority; Mr. Abdullah, Minister of Planning of the Palestinian Authority; and himself on behalf of the Committee. In the ensuing plenary sessions, presentations had been made by 15 experts, including 2 Palestinians and 3 Israelis.

29. Participants had heard reports on the deteriorating economic and humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem. While condemning the killing of innocent civilians, either by Israelis or Palestinians, they had concurred that the total blockade imposed on the entire civilian population in Gaza and the resulting humanitarian and economic crisis was unjust and unacceptable. Serious concern had been expressed over the fact that Israel was neglecting its obligation under the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War by preventing the provision of basic assistance to those in urgent need. It had been noted that, as Israel controlled not only all the border crossings, but virtually every aspect of the Palestinian population's life, the Gaza Strip was still under occupation.

30. The participants had also drawn attention to the dire situation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem observing that the number of physical obstacles had increased over the previous year, despite the Israeli Government's promise to reduce them. They had recalled that the construction of the wall in contravention of the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice was illegal under international law, as was the current expansion of settlements through the issuance of thousands of tenders by the Israeli Government for new housing units.

31. Participants had heard reports from humanitarian agencies working on the ground to improve the living conditions of the Palestinian people. Many of the vital initiatives and programmes that had been made possible by generous donor contributions could not be implemented owing to strict restrictions on movement and access throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Moreover, a large part of the infrastructure and institutions built by donors over the years had either been destroyed in Israeli military operations or put out of commission because of restrictions imposed by Israel. The participants had expressed appreciation for the efforts of various United Nations system agencies and programmes working on the ground to support the Palestinian people, including UNRWA, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Food Programme (WFP), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

32. The crucial importance of international donor assistance to the functioning of the Palestinian institutions had also been emphasized. The participants had welcomed the substantial pledges made at the Paris donors' conference and believed that the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan had the full potential to succeed if accompanied by Israel's intention to fulfil its obligations and supported by the international donor community. Emergency assistance alone, however, would not bring about sustainable development. Restrictions on movement were the major obstacle to the improvement of the humanitarian situation and to any long-term economic recovery. Those restrictions also hampered efforts by international organizations on the ground to deliver emergency aid and should be lifted based on the Agreement on Movement and Access of 15 November 2005.

33. The participants had reaffirmed that only when there were signs of substantial improvement in the living conditions of the Palestinian population would the political process produce the desired results, and that sustainable long-term economic and social development would be possible only when Israel ended the occupation and a viable Palestinian State was created on the basis of the 1967 borders.

34. Also while in Amman, the Committee's delegation had held a round-table discussion with UNRWA Commissioner-General Karen AbuZayd and regional directors at the UNRWA Amman Headquarters. Through briefings on the Agency's various fields of work in the country the members of the delegation had gained a greater insight into the current plight of Palestine refugees, as well as the Agency's work to improve their living conditions. The delegation had had a very useful exchange of views with the Commissioner-General during which she had stressed the importance of the Committee's advocacy work in developing future cooperation between her Agency and the Committee. Following the round-table discussion, the delegation had visited the UNRWA scanning operation centre for refugee records, where it had been briefed on the establishment of a comprehensive computer database of refugee records through the digitization of all documents in the custody of UNRWA.

35. The Committee's delegation had been received by the Prime Minister of Jordan, Mr. Dahabi and had expressed appreciation to the Jordanian Government for its unwavering political and economic support and humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people. It had been agreed that the current cooperation between Jordan and the Committee in support of the Palestinian cause should be continued and strengthened. The delegation had reiterated the Committee's position that without a just solution to the question of Palestine refugees, there would be no comprehensive and lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

36. The day after the Seminar ended, the Committee delegation had visited the Palestine refugee camps of Husn and Irbid in northern Jordan — the first-ever such visit by a Committee delegation — where UNRWA provided social services to the refugees. It had been both educational and humbling; the

delegation had observed first-hand the reality of daily life for Palestine refugees and the work of UNRWA to improve their living conditions.

37. In accordance with established practice, the report of the Seminar would be issued, in due course, as a publication of the Division for Palestinian Rights, and would be circulated at the upcoming sessions of the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly. Additional information about the Committee delegation's visit to Jordan, including the Seminar, was also available on the website maintained by the Division.

38. If there were no comments, he would take it that the Committee wished to take note of the report.

39. *It was so decided.*

United Nations International Conference on Palestine Refugees, headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Paris, 29 and 30 April 2008 (Working Paper No. 2)

40. **The Chairman** drew the Committee's attention to the provisional programme of work for the United Nations International Conference on Palestine Refugees to be held in Paris at the headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on 29 and 30 April 2008, contained in Working Paper No. 2.

41. The objective of the Conference was to assess the current situation of Palestine refugees and to examine the role of the Organization in alleviating their plight. The Conference would also serve to examine efforts directed towards reaching agreement on a fair solution to the refugee problem in keeping with relevant United Nations resolutions, and as a prerequisite for resolving the Palestine question and achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

42. Invitations had been sent to internationally renowned experts, both Israeli and Palestinian, representatives of the United Nations system and other intergovernmental organizations, civil society and the media.

43. If there were no comments, he would take it that the Committee wished to approve the provisional programme for the International Conference on Palestine Refugees, to be held at UNESCO Headquarters on 29 and 30 April 2008.

44. *It was so decided.*

45. **The Chairman** said that the Committee's delegation to the Conference would be composed of Mr. Malmierca Díaz and Mr. Tanin, Vice-Chairmen of the Committee; Mr. Borg, Rapporteur; Mr. Mansour, Permanent Observer for Palestine; and himself.

United Nations International Meeting on the Question of Palestine, Malta, 3 and 4 June 2008 (Working Paper No. 3)

46. **The Chairman** drew the Committee's attention to the provisional programme of work for the United Nations International Meeting on the Question of Palestine, to be held in Malta on 3 and 4 June 2008, contained in Working Paper No. 3.

47. The objective of the meeting was to foster greater support within the international community for the creation of a climate conducive to the advancement of the permanent status negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. Meeting participants would discuss the impact of settlement construction work on the current political process and the need for the parties to meet Road Map commitments. They would also examine the effects of the construction of the wall in the occupied West Bank, and the importance of finding a solution to the question of Jerusalem.

48. If there were no comments, he would take it that the Committee wished to approve the provisional programme for the International Meeting on the Question of Palestine, to be held in Malta on 3 and 4 June 2008.

49. *It was so decided.*

The meeting rose at 4.25 p.m.